Interview with Lucas Ihlein, Sydney, March 2008

Sandra Bridie: Lucas, we are just going to run through the questions here and keep it simple for the first round. So Lucas, could you give examples of the range of activities you undertake as an artist, what you see as the components of your practice and whether that's a relevant way of speaking about your practice.

Lucas Ihlein: When somebody asks me, "So what kind of art do you do?" – that's a similar kind of question and I often answer, "I do all sorts of different things."

In a real nutshell, I make websites as art projects, or blogs, blogs as art, that's been a big thing that I have been doing lately.

I work with a group called *The Teaching and Learning Cinema* and we are an experimental cinema group. Sometimes that involves coordinating or curating screening nights and sometimes that involves us physically putting on films ourselves. It's an historical project of re-making or re-enacting cinema events, or expanded cinema events from the 1970s.

I work with a group called *Squat Space*, which began as a gallery in a squat in Sydney and has evolved to become a collaborative artists' group, so we author projects as *Squat Space*. We can go into what those projects might be later on.

I am also involved in a group called the *Network of Uncollectable Artists* and the original activity of that group was to produce a set of bubblegum cards featuring Australia's fifty most uncollectable artists. That was both a curatorial project containing all those fifty different artworks and also an artwork in itself. That group since that time has gone on to become an online network where we share information about interesting things that are going on, broadly speaking, in what we call 'The uncollectable art world'.

I work with a group called the *Big Fag Press*; we have a big old offset printing press where we do posters and prints. It's another activity that I am involved in.

I am also studying for my PhD, which is an art practice/art theory thesis, focussing mainly on my activity with blogs as art.

Occasionally I do artist's talks at universities as a guest lecturer on various subjects, either on my own practice or on what's broadly known as Relational Aesthetics or Expanded Cinema. Those are the three areas that I get called on to do guest lectures, and sometimes

the activities of *Squat Space* and sometimes that focuses on the understanding of Public Art and what Public Art can be or should be, and that's linked with Relational Aesthetics.

So, I guess I am broadly involved in discussions around not just being an art practitioner, but discussions around my field, leading them and also participating in them.

I have a blog which is not an artwork its my blog where I talk about things that I am interested in. That was my very first blog, called *Bilateral*.

What about the 'Lucazoid' blog?

'Lucazoid' is a nickname that I have which I have used as the URL of some of my websites – it is sometimes the name that I go under, especially if I am operating with *Squat Space*, where we prefer to use nicknames rather than real names because our activities are sometimes less than legal.

Is there anything else that you can think of that I haven't mentioned?

I wrote a list from both your and Lisa's websites and this was from the Lucazoid.com and I thought your configuration of the nine picture squares on your homepage was an interesting way to break down your practice. A couple of the projects were historical – the 'residential projects' Bilateral Kellerberrin and Bilateral Petersham – but the others were still up and going. What about advocacy of a sector or writing advocating a sector? Do you see this as a strand?

I guess the work with the *Network of Uncollectable Artists* is partly that. It is an advocacy of a particular kind of art practice, which we call jokingly 'uncollectable', partly as a response or a piss take on 'Australia's fifty most collectable artists', but uncollectable art can be so different many things. It was mainly about practices, which make an effort to be conscious about the context in which they present themselves. So it could be anything, but it's people that are working in ways where they really care about where their work is shown and how it participates in its communities or its contexts. Whether that means, "the best place to show my work is in a gallery on this particular occasion", that's totally fine, but I guess what we as a network often notice or observe is that art projects can operate much more effectively sometimes outside of that gallery context.

Not out of a commercial instinct?

Yeah, certainly beyond that simple commodified object circulation sector.

So this is just an aside, but NUCA began by making a virtue out of the fact that you make work that you cannot see how you can frame it for a seller and then you found that there are conditions under which such 'uncollectable' work is made that are preferable and desirable to you.

I think that's the case and also it came from a frustration, personally my own involvement came out of this frustration about the particular kind of work that we do, which is maybe ephemeral or communication oriented or conceptual – certainly not commodified, anyway. The historicisation of it is very poor, so we are constantly, to use the cliché, 'reinventing the wheel', so this desire to access our own historical ancestors in that kind of practice and recognising that it is in fact a tradition of practice that we are involved in – it's not this brand new thing, but that this tradition has a lot of difficulty in laying down evidence of itself for history. So we were trying to work out, well, what are going to do about that from our own position now in order to assist future generations of people like us.

Definitely one of the strands I am involved with is delving into past histories and historicisation of the present.

We are not going to talk about this today, but there is also that other question of that almost over-proliferation of self-historicising that's going on now, an over-textualising of practice, so there is this welter of information out there that is pretty hard to get through. This is probably a response from a grassroots arts community wanting to write their history (and this welter predominantly exists in the grassroots community) because it has previously not been factored into the larger history. This overcompensation at this stage is a good thing, I think, just a bit turgid to read.

Next question: Who are your mentor figures or influences?

I guess I could tell a sort of historical narrative about that, because my development as an artist was subject to many different influences. When I was aspiring to be an artist I was fascinated by impasto oil painting, representational techniques by people like Vincent van Gogh, Egon Schiele and Lucien Freud, tortured representation systems, which had an expressionism, which had a strong mark-making tradition where drawing was really

important. I was always drawn to drawing because of the trace that it left behind of its own activity. Broadly speaking, I am an artist that works with what's in front of me or what's available to me so there's a whole lot of chance involved. You know the way that high art school classes are set up, painting is the thing that you do, that's what art is, or it was at the time for me. These days they get a lot more options. What I realise now about myself, when I went to university the thing that was essential was not the paint or the charcoal, but that leaving behind of the trace of itself in the moment of action. So I began to do these hybrid projects, which were about making drawings and paintings but about documenting that process to create almost an animation of itself and also a sort of collaborative process. For example, in one project I did a drawing and then made it up into a Post Pack and then sent it to a friend of mine in Japan to work over the top of and then document her changes to my drawing. So, it was this interest in the obliteration of clear authorship. But not just the obliteration to the point of fuzziness, it was to also obsessively document it so there was maybe some evidence behind that we could sift through and work out where those boundaries lie about authorship. I think you could say there was always a fixed boundary. In that early phase, what I am getting to, is there was a particular artwork which when I discovered that it existed, it had a real impact on me and it was Robert Morris' 'Box with the sound of its own making'. I just thought that all the things that I was struggling with he had crystallised into this perfect manifestation which I found exciting and empowering, but at the same time it threw me into – it was not a crisis – but it was the first example that I can think of where I thought to myself, I wish somebody had told me about this before.

Can I just ask you this at this point, when you came across Robert Morris' work were you thinking of making works like that at that point – so it was a recognition of your own desire for a work in someone else's, like a mirror image to yourself where the work you thought you were creating in a void, actually pre-exited? Or was it a work that you saw and then that allowed you to make these other works?

With the Robert Morris stuff, at that stage I had actually started to work sculpturally, together with my collaborator at the time, Mick Hender – we had done this project, which was about creating a dark box, which displayed a numbered peg, which was hammered into this ground in this field that was part of this student sculpture exhibition. Each student was given a

numbered peg that indicated their site, and the idea was that you pulled out the peg, chucked it away and put your sculpture in its place. We were so fascinated with the technology of the peg that we thought we couldn't go beyond it – there was no way that we could do better than it, we already saw it as a sculptural object that spoke to so many issues of landownership and marking and space. It was beautiful, it was this wooden stake that was painted turquoise with a red number and ours was number twenty-four. So we built this glass case that we just put over the top of it in order to create this framework of attention for the peg itself. That is a trait that has pretty much travelled through my art practice ever since, in no matter what format I have worked in. It's often this thing of throwing this framework over this thing that might already be there rather than coming up with something that's brand new. So I saw Robert Morris as a touchstone in that and through him people like John Cage. So I was really excited to discover that I had this connection to people who had done this kind of work and I could really – I have never been the kind of person that felt that it was a crisis, like, "Oh my God, it's been done before therefore there is no point in me doing it." I thought, this is great, I can use what they have done, it makes my job easier, especially within an art school context; it helps you to clarify the concepts behind what you are doing because you can point to someone else's practice and so on. I became much more embedded in conceptual art history after that time, I think, because I became aware of it – people like Ian Burn. That was a discovery. So I did begin to make these, almost like a re-enactment of these things that happened in the '60s which were about the desire to shed unnecessary elements and get down to some essential component of what you were trying to do, so a kind of minimalistic impulse. I think it was at the point of where I recognised that what I was trying to do was to draw attention to the present conditions of our situation that we are in that I realised that that was pretty much all that I needed to do, rather than go to this vast effort to create a whole situation and then draw attention to the conditions of that situation. An example of that is a piece that Mick Hender and I did together where we had a room in a gallery which was empty except for a table and a fridge which had orange juice and water in it and a set of instructions outside the room which drew attention to your conditions of spectatorship. So to a certain extent, from the audience's point of view, there was no artwork or the artwork was the act of participating in this set of instructions or something. So it was part of this further drive towards this minimalistic approach and there was this whole set of

American artists who I was fascinated with at the time like Robert Barry and Joseph Kosuth and who else? Morris has always been a touchstone for my practice, also because he worked across so many different media and ways himself, as a performance artist, as a conceptual artist – he used a lot of text in his work, which I have always been attracted to; also as a minimalist sculptor and I was doing a lot of carpentry oriented sculptural things. I would have to say he was a big early influence on me.

So at that point your practice would have been more object-based and you began as a sculptor?

I suppose so. I was always a painter and a drawer, but I got distracted along my path by the pleasure of building things and I found that I was quite good at woodwork. I began to make woodwork objects that drew attention to the conditions of spectatorship in galleries, like pedestals which had some twist to them that made you realise that the plinth or pedestal is an interesting piece of technology in itself – stuff like that, which would somehow de-familiarise the process of visiting a gallery so you became conscious of where you were in the space. I think this was all part of that whole minimalist tradition, at least the one that Robert Morris was interested in. So in that sense it spoke to a sculptural history. As things progressed I started to do performances that sat within a performance art tradition, also that drew attention to the weirdness or the oddness of an audience sitting watching a performer doing something. So there was lots of stuff that I didn't realise at the time or call it that, but now I understand it was a defamiliarisation process in a Brechtian sense. As I got to the end of my studies – the period I have been talking about is '92 to '96 and as I got to the end of that period, because I am someone that tends to work with what's in front of me I increasingly began to make work about the educational context, because I had been at university for awhile and before that high school. These performances, whereas before they had been about the relationship between audience and performer, now they were about teacher and student relationships and I saw an analogy or a connection between those two things, especially the theatre as an architectural space and the classroom, a similar kind of space.

Were the works didactic and rhetorical?

They were playful and often what I was trying to do was problematise the authority of the speaking voice, the authority of the teacher or the performer. One of the methods I developed at that period was 'dithering' and this was a concept that I borrowed from Ian Burn. I have to say Ian Burn at that stage was a big influence on me – his writing in a way and some of his conceptual artworks that he made with Mel Ramsden, He had these educational theories that he wrote about in some of his books. He had one called the 'dithering device' and it was about how the role of the teacher in the art school should not be as a kind of top down instruction process, a didactic process. A dithering device in a scientific lab is a device that you plug onto a piece of lab apparatus and it dithers back and forth in order to make the piece of apparatus run smoothly, and he said this is the metaphor you should use for the teacher in the art school context. So I developed 'dithering' as a performative technique, which made the audience kind of uncomfortable.

How would you 'dither'?

It was a kind of theatre, I would construct these situations where I was about to give a lecture and I would have a whole battery of material prepared and it was clear that there was lots of stuff that I could talk about but I would get a little bit into it, enough to catch everybody's interest, and then I had deliberately have prepared no more and I would then enter this period of dithering which made everybody feel quite uncomfortable, but also it was quite amusing. I think I was quite excited by a piece by Dan Graham, called 'Performer, Audience, Mirror' from about 1978 in which he has a huge mirror behind him and the audience can see themselves in the mirror and he describes in great detail what he can see of the audience and they become very conscious of themselves. A similar thing happened where I would point out people in the audience who were laughing at the situation and I was genuinely nervous and a little bit shocked about the fact that this event was turning into a comedy, which I had never intended it to be, and so on. It was just one more in a series of Brechtian techniques in order to draw attention to the current situation or to throw a frame around it, so that we collectively became self-conscious in a productive way rather than pleasurably sitting back and allowing the performer to play their magic. I was an angry young man wanting to break the audience out of their passivity.

Those behavioural ticks of the lecturer, I know I was fascinated with these when I went to lectures as an arts student. The actor Max Gillies did a performance in the '80s playing a lecturer whose memory was in decline and his material wandered from his academic speciality to the break-up of his relationship. In this he used the 'framing devices' of the lecture, holding on to the lectern, academic rhetoric, pacing to and fro from the lectern, putting his glasses off and on as a pausing or 'dithering' device or to emphasise a point. Those studied ticks, which were observable as part of the body language in many academic presentations and hence the object of humour in those performances by Gillies (to a generally tertiary educated audience), were what drew my attention in lectures and more often than not distracted me from their subject content.

I am probably more interested in those ticks now than I was then, I don't think I was all that aware of that stuff except as a kind of theatrical technique perhaps, rather than as a thing to observe in itself. To move on with my influences, it was very important for me in my honours year at the University of Western Sydney, and I had a supervisor called Chris Fortescue. Chris was a wonderful supervisor. His work didn't necessarily have anything to do with mine but he had a kind of perverse way of interacting with me that always somehow was very useful for me. If I was really excited about something I was currently involved in, he would tear it to shreds. If I was really upset about what I was doing and had doubts about it, he would support it. We had a really fruitful conversational relationship where as a mentor it as pretty clear he didn't give a shit – it was up to me, it was my stuff. He was interested and amused by these dilemmas I was constantly creating for myself. That was the kind of paradigm of problem that I would get myself into. It would be like, "I am really frustrated by this relationship between the audience and the performer, what can I do to find out something?" So at that time I did a piece called *Cornflakes* where I ate a bowl of Cornflakes in front of an audience for five nights in a row. My theory was that the audience situation makes any activity highly charged and theatrical whereas eating a bowl of Cornflakes in the morning before I leave to go to work was something that I was almost entirely unconscious of. I could leave the house and wonder if I had even eaten that bowl of Cornflakes, I was in a state of blissful unconsciousness, so I imported that activity into the performance arena. I thought that if by doing it every single night, the eating of a bowl of Cornflakes in front of an audience is clearly going to turn it into a highly charged, but if I do it every single night will I

be able to normalise my behaviour to the point where I return to that state of blissful unconsciousness? This was the kind of stupid premise that I started out with, like research. For some reason, working with someone like Chris I was able to go for it" "Well just try it out, there is no way you can answer it without doing it, as stupid as it sounds." Of course it was a big failure because as the nights went on it became even more charged as the audience were waiting for something to happen: "He just ate a bowl of Cornflakes last night and nothing special happened, there was no punchline. Perhaps tonight something will happen."

So your audience were expecting it to be a cumulative performance, rather than a repetitive Beckettian event where nothing happens.

It was at a performance festival in Perth and there were many different acts over the course of the night. Who knows what their expectations were but the theatrical situation almost demands that something should happen and if it didn't happen tonight surely it would happen tomorrow night. I guess because of the nature of performance art it is not as if you have a theatrical run and it's identical each night – something might evolve. And lots of people at that time were doing what they called 'improvisational performances' and this is the reason why I started to do performance art. I should mention that as an influence, but as a negative one, I hated it. They would say, "We're going to get up on stage," they would be dancers or actors or whatever and they would get up on stage and would say, For ten to fifteen minutes we are going to improvise." But what actually happened was we were bored to tears and the performers were thrown back on whatever skills they already had. So, if the performers were dancers they would do dance moves, which they had obviously practiced before because that was part of their vocabulary. I began to question that – what is improvisation except for a bad name for unpreparedness or something? So my way of getting around this was – Fuck this performance art stuff, I am going to start to do some, but I am going to put a really rigid rule on the situation such that anybody could do it. There is no special skill required, you don't have to be this mysteriously genius-like improviser. I could substitute someone else in and they could eat the bowl of Cornflakes and see what happens. Anybody is capable of doing that; there is no good way to do it. So this was my way of critiquing that other stuff. In fact, Mick Hender, my collaborator, did a similar performance, which he called 'Headphones'

which was like a flip side: in front of the audience he would sit and select a track and sing along to it at full volume.

Have you heard of 'Made Austria,' a Melbourne group with Luke Sinclair and Anya Latham? They are a group who all put on headphones that are playing the same song and sing in unison or are given parts to sing – they are hilarious recordings.

Yes, because you come across as a bit of a moron. Other people have done this, Gillian Wearing has done similar things. You are in public on a train you are singing along and you are in this bliss and everyone else is suffering as a result. So he set up this situation where he was sitting in front of an audience, they were all looking at him and he withdrew into himself and sang. Between the two of us, we managed to inflect the performance festival in such a way that it became a little bit Jacobean, because for him, the audience became aware that he was wilfully ignoring them on stage, which was kind of an insult, whereas with me I was doing something that was so banal and stupid and yet it was creating this high tension. The audience began to throw paper aeroplanes and scrunched up programs at Mick whereas with me they were almost frozen rigid with fear and expectation that something was going to happen. They began to participate with other performances in similar ways, by interjecting and shouting things out. It was wonderful actually, it was a really amazing period for us as a kind of performative experiment – of course, it completely relied on the theatrical context.

Which is what your later work has become – sometimes it's a displacement or placing an everyday activity into the frame, so that once it becomes an object like your blogs or your publications then experience is displaced into artwork. You are taking an event, as you said, from the morning when you are zoned out and it's a private thing and then displacing it into the evening and onto the stage. I wonder what state of mind you are in, because that is a factor in the performance then. Because often when you stumble out of bed you are just staring into no space and eating, as you said, in automatic. All those decisions become part of the work, then the simple act of eating breakfast on stage each night for a week does become an artwork, and quite a highly rendered work.

Yeah, I think that was the beginning of some of the stuff that I have done in more recent years, which is about how a kind of framework in some way changes or tweaks the way that I

live my life through repetition. Mick and I were always conscious of how problematic art was in that it required a special kind of mindset and set of historical reference points in order to access it, and we hated this. We used our grandmothers and parents as litmus tests. People felt intimidated when they came into galleries. They were, like, "I don't know whether this is good or not and I feel disempowered." We wanted to set up situations where it was clear that the stupidity of this situation meant that you didn't have to know anything special, all right? You could immediately access the reference points. To a certain extent they also poked fun at the seriousness of other kinds of self-important artworks. Part of that comes from a conceptual art history as well, one in which the artwork is not some kind of specimen to be decoded by historians, but where the artist takes on some of that job within the artwork.

We are asking about influences and mentor figures. I am wondering if Fluxus could be an influence in that kind of performance work, and still whilst banality and everyday experience is part of it, it also makes it more strange as art to people who feel dumb in front of art. It is as if the something that from everyone's experience the artist is performing is still bewildering to them.

I only got into Fluxus a bit later, though it would have seemed reasonable for me to absorb myself into the histories of Fluxus around the time I was doing those *Cornflakes* performances. But I didn't, I don't know why. It was chance that it didn't come across my radar. I have always been a very whimsical researcher, I have never been methodical and gone out and covered every base. By the time Fluxus came onto my radar it was 2001 and I became interested in it partly because of the concept of 'the score'.

Because the act is almost like a monochrome as performance – all you are doing is eating a bowl of Cornflakes.

In a way I did adhere to that, because when I put in a proposal to the gallery to show that work, it was a paragraph that described what the performer would do – The performer does this, the performer does that," It wouldn't be me, so clearly if I was unavailable someone else could be substituted in. I suppose by the time that I came across this thing that George Maciunas was doing, which was making scores for performances, I was pretty excited, also by the idea that by following these instructions I could actually access the work itself – it wasn't a representation of the work, it was the work. During this event called *Bilateral* I lived

in the gallery for a month, first in Melbourne at Found Project Space and next at the Experimental Art Foundation (EAF). For the EAF version of it I actually collaborated with twenty-five visitors who came into the show to be part of this Fluxus performance by Albert Fine called *Fluxorchestra for twenty-four performers.* We all were complicit in being authors of this Fluxus performance, which was very exciting. The score for it was in the collection of the EAF's archives. It was at that stage that I became really excited about Fluxus. It's funny, you know, because all those artists did lots of different things but a lot of those works with scores, I think the scores were initially being written by Maciunas in response to something that an artist did as a performance.

As a retrospective notation on the work?

A retrospective notation, and then I think it caught on and artists began to write scores and they began to write them in similar styles in such a way that it didn't matter that it was a piece by Albert Fine or by John Hendrix, they were Fluxus pieces. In a way, perhaps, that was the influence of Maciunas in the framing of their practice. But I was also really excited about what Allan Kaprow had been doing with happenings, which seemed to be a bit looser. I have to say that in the subsequent years that the work of Allan Kaprow has been a strong touchstone and influence, and his writing as well. He is really important as someone who has left behind a record of his obsessions and his ideas in a fairly rigorous format although quite accessible. At the same time I got into Fluxus for this reason of the score, I got into Expanded Cinema, so the work of William Rabin, Guy Sherwin and Anthony McCall who were three London film makers. It was a Western world movement, including Japan, Austria, America and England. For some reason the work of the English film makers had a big impact on me, I think it was a bit more cottage industry, the American stuff was very spectacular – light and sound show spectacle stuff – and I was more interested in the carefully controlled situations with audiences. The writings of people like Malcolm Le Grice, I found them really inspiring. A lot of the stuff that William Rabin and Anthony McCall were doing was really John Cage influenced, so he has constantly been this person that I have kept in mind while working on stuff. I think it's only late 2003 that I started reading about Tiravenija's work through *Relational Aesthetics* by Bourriaud. Those have been reference points that I have thought about recently, but I don't know if they have been influences on me as such as much as

when I discovered Bourriaud – it was like, “Great, someone’s actually talking about the kind of work that I do.” That more or less brings us up to present.

You have spoken about a couple of international movements for a collective activity and a space or project activity. I am wondering if there are any more local recent, Sydney-based or Perth-based precursors to your activities – the social, recreational and collective activities?

I think in the last couple of years it has been great to find out about the work of the artist Ian Millis. He was an artist who collaborated with Ian Burn, certainly part of the same scene. This was in the early ‘70s but then he dropped out of the art world. He was also involved in squatting movements in the late ‘60s and then in the ‘80s, although he had dropped out self-consciously from the art world – he participated in the union movement as a graphic designer and banner maker. So he brought his aesthetic skills to bear on union activitism. Ian Burn did this as well, but that is much more historicised. But part of my interest in Ian Millis is that he self-consciously wrote himself out of history. It has only been in the last few years that he has realised that although there was a lot of integrity in what he did he was also shooting himself in the foot because it was really interesting stuff he was doing but nobody knows about it. There is a whole generation of artists like me who are hungry to find out more. So it was exciting to come across him. Apart from that there were a couple of film makers, David Perry and Albie Thoms, who were working in the Sydney Film Co-op in the late ‘60s and ‘early ‘70s who did these experimental theatre-cum-film events, which I think were influenced by Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty and stuff like that. In the early ‘90s we were exposed to some of their work in Western Australia by a film historian called Peter Mudie, so we were able to access that history which otherwise hardly anybody ever finds out about. That was a strong influence. In Western Australia when I was studying, I must say I didn’t find much inspiring local work. In many cases my work was a reaction against stuff that was going on there. Although I had plenty of friends who were artists and even from older generations, I felt to a certain extent unchallenged, which is partly why I went to Sydney. The thing about being a small place was that I was becoming the local expert on these matters and I didn’t really want to be, I wanted to be thrown again into the deep end where people were thinking about things more than I was so I could learn something. When I came to Sydney I discovered there were artists like a guy named Stephen Little – who else was there? There was a New

Zealand artist called Simon Cavanaugh and Kyle Ashpole. They were doing these conceptual painting works, which used conceptual art history and self-referentiality and all that sort of stuff. They were really steeped in the theory behind it and I found that great, it was really good to see people who knew these reference points. I respected the work they did but it wasn't the direction I was going in. To a certain extent, I haven't really thought about this before, but a lot of the stuff I have done in Australia has been – maybe this is part of an Australian tradition which is about getting really excited about histories that are available from overseas, really steeping in them, and then practicing something like that locally, but not necessarily being aware of local equivalents of that. To a certain extent I was conscious of that because I had read Terry Smith's essay 'The Provincialism Problem' and I was aware of how interesting that was that these artists in *The Field* exhibition were operating on some half-baked, second-hand version of Field painting or whatever and the way that Ian Burn had turned that into an asset – you know, "That's fine, that's what we are, that's where we are coming from. Perhaps other local influences or touchstones will come to me."

What kind of an impact did historical Sydney-based artists' projects like First Draft or Inhibodress have on you in respect to the fact that they presented a model of self-determining practice within a gallery or project framework?

I was really excited to find out about the histories of Inhibodress. We saw a lot of films by Mike Parr and Peter Kennedy in the early '90s in Perth because one of our teachers was a guy called David Bromfield who wrote a book about Mike Parr and he was a big fan of Mike's work. I guess I appreciated what First Draft were doing but it never really occurred to me that I needed to pay much attention to it except as a place where you could show work. There were a few really influential places. One of them was 151 Regent Street Gallery, which was in Redfern-Chippendale in the late '90s, I think around from '96 and '98, run by Rowan Stanley and Bec Neil. That was the first artist-run initiative gallery that I really felt to be a part of a community. It was quite tangible, it wasn't just a place where you showed something, people came to look at it and you either liked it or didn't like it. It was like this community of people who assembled around this space and accepted and nurtured each other's practices and socialised, and I was a part of it rather than being a young artist looking in on someone

else's world. I didn't show there regularly because I have never been a person to have too many gallery shows, but I did some and I organised some film events there and a few exhibitions but I was a part of that group and there was a dialogue going on. There was something about the way that Rowan and Bec ran things that I really admired and they subsequently went on to run a gallery in London called Stuff Gallery and what I learnt from them was hospitality. It was all about a social hospitality. Subsequently we were much more conscious of it when Simon Barney was running Briefcase Gallery, was that the gallery context was almost a pretext for socialisation. Because he went bust – South Gallery got claimed for redevelopment. Simon Barney and Chris Fortescue lost that space, so Simon began wondering, why do we need a space? So he started a gallery in his briefcase and we met in the pub and the socialisation happened there, and Rowan and Bec were doing a similar kind of thing in London, they were providing a social context. It was still good experimental or post-conceptual art practice, but it was not so austere as to do away with the social context. I really would credit, especially Rowan from 151 Gallery for being a big influence on my practice in terms of hospitality. Cocktails and coffee were his specialities and welcoming people and making them feel at home in his space. When I was doing more gallery-oriented works in the early 2000s they were all things that I adopted, especially coffee, making coffee for people – there was something very special about it, a ritual that encouraged discussion. Coming back to this influences thing, I shouldn't go without talking about David Medalla who is this Filipino artist who spent many years in London. He's in his sixties now. He was involved with a lot of really cutting edge stuff in the '60s in London, including setting up his own gallery spaces and art magazines and doing a lot of performance work and Fluxus crossover stuff. He set a thing called the London Biennale, which is a kind of piss take on Biennales on the one hand but on the other hand it is deadly serious. The concept is, unlike any other Biennale in the world, anyone can participate in the London Biennale. So it throws into crisis the whole concept of quality, choice, arbitration, who will decide what's good and what's bad and all this sort of stuff and some people have problems with that because the London Biennale often has dreadful stuff involved. But David has this fantastically inclusive and welcoming and hospitable attitude, which is about artists working together and taking responsibility for their own practice such that it's up you – if the work is bad, that's your problem, but it doesn't mean you are not allowed to be involved. It

just so happens that the London Biennale is not some kind of two-bit, wannabe, try-hard organization because David himself is an amazing, fascinating artist, but he has this amazing network of artists from all around the world, who are recognised in art world circles as calibre artists. They problematise the Biennale because they get involved as well alongside these younger artists, many of whom are amazing but some of whom are not so great. So you get this real soup of stuff – it really reminds you that it is up to you to navigate your way through this stuff. It's a kind of freedom that freaks people out. It is very challenging and political process, but it doesn't involve any banner waving or any didactic demarcations of territory. In that sense I think what David is doing is really quite amazing. So it has been something that I always keep in mind, especially with some of the stuff we do with Squat Space. For example we have a film night called Squat Fest where anybody can bring a film along and some of them are dreadful and some of them are sparkling and it's up to you to determine your participation and you just have to be there on the night, so you take responsibility for your own stuff. Some people have real problems with that; they would much prefer a tightly coordinated structure. With the Teaching and Learning Cinema or Sydney Moving Image Coalition, as we formerly called ourselves, it was a similar process – bring your own film, like a club, some stuff terrible, some stuff just amazing, but to get away from that whole connoisseurship thing which is often about self-aggrandisement and empire building.

It sounds like the way Clifton Hill Community Music Centre operated. Any ratbag could show their stuff and in fact it wasn't a great platform for those who wanted commercial viability or to make their name, so they ended up not showing or performing. It was more the weird and the wacky and the bad.

What was that?

They were around 1978-1982/3. David Chesworth was the coordinator for most of the run. Paul Taylor and Adrian Martin hung out there and it was a venue for experimental film, performance and music. Warren Burt and Ernie Althoff were two of the avant-garde musicians who did recordings and performances there, and David Chesworth, with his Essendon Airport and Philip Brophy with Tsk-Tsk-Tsk were the post-pop contingent. Both David Chesworth and Philip Brophy signatured it as one of the first post-modern venues and it was located in an old organ factory set up as a large community centre, so they included

community music events such as Macedonian nights into the program. The program at the CHCMC might start with a bit of experimental music, film and hybrid performance and then be followed by a Macedonian choir.

I am just going to run through some questions and let me know if you think you have answered them or not.

List the central texts, both local and international, that your work revolves around? You have spoken about a few pieces of writing by other authors that have been influential to you. Is there anything recent that you would say is a source or a generator for your practice?

I guess I should mention some fictional stuff. Calvino, he did this book *Time and the Hunter* – I haven't got it because whenever I get a Calvino books I end up giving them away to people. There was *Cosmicomics* and there was one before that, and also there is some stuff by Alain Robbe-Grillet, which I found fascinating as a sort of conceptual literature that was almost unreadable, but which folded back on itself. Especially in 1990s I was very interested in self-referentiality of artworks that drew attention to themselves in a way.

Why Calvino?

Similar reason, the literature that drew attention to itself and almost had an intellectual pleasure in doing so – things like, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, which didn't just accept the novel format as a way to get across an idea or a chink of content but actually played with the format of the novel in itself. I recently read a book by Kazuo Ishiguro called *The Unconsoled*. Ishiguro also wrote *The Remains of the Day,* which I haven't read, but *The Unconsoled* is this immensely long novel about this musician, a concert pianist who comes to town and he has got to perform in a concert on Thursday night which is only a few days away, so it is about never quite getting there. He is constantly being dragged around town to this place and that place to meet these people. The town is in a kind of crisis and his coming to town is somehow going to save the cultural landscape because he is a local boy who has made good, who disappeared and now he has come back to honour us. So he is shipped around town to do these appearances and he feels like a puppet and very uncomfortable, he is constantly on his way to a meeting or an interview and he is constantly being waylaid or mislaid and disappearing and having another meeting. There are thousands of bifurcating paths of his passive agenda – it is just crazy, it is like a bad dream, it is like a nightmare. I

was reading that while I was doing my *Bilateral Petersham* project and there was something about this idea that you are going somewhere but everyday that you wake up is like *Groundhog Day* – it's this constant return. You were moving inevitably towards a conclusion that was going to happen one way or the other but who knew what that was going to be and there was a sense of anticipation and dread and drama about it.

Like in Tarkovsky's Stalker, *they are looking for heaven, which could be just around the corner, and when they get there it is just as drab. There is no difference between heaven and where they have come from, and all the way there is a constant ominous feeling that there is something around the corner, but it is never anything.*

It is something about the way that these future motivations effect what you do in the here and now – I think that was a tension that I was working with. Recently I have been reading a book by an Italian writer Carlo Levi called *Christ Stopped at Eboli.* In 1935 Eboli was an anti-fascist and he was exiled within Italy to this far, far, far southern town in the mountains, which was as bad as being sent to jail, but from this, he wrote this memoir about his life in the town and all the people that he met, from the mayor to the local school teacher to the priest. So he's an artist, he also happened to be a doctor, so they used his services as a doctor but they also were excited about his services as an aesthetic practitioner. When I was reading it, it was like, wow this is like Kellerberrin, or more than like Petersham because he is an outsider and people latch onto him for different reasons and see opportunities in him that he never would have imagined. In this process the people of the town as well as the main protagonist come to realise things about themselves that they wouldn't have before.

So in fiction sometimes I find these parallels, which I don't necessarily find in visual artworks.

This could be because you are spending so much time writing, so you are picking up on the rhythms of that kind of writing, the memoir, so of course those texts are going to speak to you more – it seems likely that such writing would serve as a more natural precedent for your own writing works. And how those writing pieces work as art, is informed by the fact that it stands outside the usual visual context.

I don't know if you have answered this: which artists' spaces/projects have you been involved with and what are the influences and mentor figures in this aspect of your practice?

I have almost answered that, but I should just add the influence of Rowan and David Madalla and hospitality. I spent a whole year overseas in ’99 and 2000 and when I came back the Broadway squats were underway and I joined and went to live there with Mick and Keg and Texta and Danno. We formed *Squat Space*, which was a gallery within the squats – that was an artists-run initiative. It was the first time that I clearly remember thinking to myself, it is time for me to start running a space and creating the possibility for other artists to do their thing. I think before that time I was so absorbed in my own work that I didn’t really see what others were up to. When I went to London and spent time at Stuff Gallery with Rowan, I became aware that the role of the person running the gallery or the team was a really important one. For me it was no longer just about creating content to slot into an existing system but it was time to start coming up with new systems. So that is why in Sydney in a place where you might have to spend up to $900 to have a show in an artist-run gallery, we thought, fuck that, we are going to have a free exhibition space but it is going to operate differently. It is not going to be the kind of space where you can just come in, put something on the walls, take a photo of it for your CV, get a grant from the government. It was going to be a place where you really had to engage with the current conditions of the space and the whole real estate market. So it was like this moment of politicisation for me where I became aware of something that I guess I had always thought about, back to the peg in the ground, this technology that demarcates space and is the framing condition of our ability to be creative people. But now it was time to actually make a new system, rather than observe it and also to say “There is something rotten in the state of art.”

This assumption that you can make use of a space that is up for grabs could be made from your observations from your time in England and gaining an acquaintance with the history of use of squats for art spaces in Europe, but there isn’t the history for that kind of activity in Australia, is there?

In fact there was, but once again it is very poorly historicised. They don’t last long, even *Squat Space Gallery*, we only ran the gallery for nine months, if that. But Ian Millis was involved in the Victoria Street Squats in the late ‘60s early ‘70s. His involvement was about stopping the redevelopment of a whole tract of Victoria Street, Darlinghurst, from redevelopment. Ian, on his website, talks about it as a kind of creative practice in itself and

the importance of that. This is where things began to gel with Alan Kaprow and his essays on the blurring of art and life. You have all these artists who are posturing politically and showing stuff in galleries, and you think, oh well, you still implicitly accept that system that is currently in place and I think that is the problem that Ian had and why he decided to drop out of the art world altogether for simplicity's sake, whereas perhaps our generation is perhaps a bit less either/or in the way that we think about things.

We have never been promised a living out of art either. That is something that I personally have learnt through John Nixon, because I came along at the end of a time when young artists who did a certain type of work might assume that they could make a living through showing in a commercial gallery, but those expectations were very quickly dashed. Once this was accepted as a reality you had to assume that it was up to you to create the context to show your work, and with that an equal freedom was attained where by setting up the context for showing your work, then you could set your own agenda in how you went about this.

I think that is a whole other subject we could talk about in terms of the role of the artist in society and whether we feel whether we feel we need to be part of the welfare system in terms of a living wage for artists that's equivalent to the dole or whether we prefer to operate as a sort of freelance operators. That's a whole other discussion that is may be outside of the scope of this. Just to finish this up, *Squat Space* is the only thing you could call an artists-run initiative that I have been involved in running. The other collaborative processes I have been engaged with are more like a printing press or a network or a collaborative group. After running that space, *Squat Space Gallery*, which was really amazing, it got that out of my system, the need to operate a gallery, I felt like, we can do this stuff, but we don't need to necessarily have all this infrastructure that's required in a gallery, perhaps similar to the point that Simon Barney got to with his Briefcase Gallery.

Have you coordinated any smaller scale projects?

The Network of Uncollectable Artists bubblegum cards was an artist's project that I coordinated with about half a dozen other artists.

You know Lisa Kelly, I would say, definitely coordinates projects outside of the spaces she has initiated, so have you had any activity like that where you have curated a show or

curated an event? The Teaching and Learning Cinema, would you say that fits into my question?

Yeah, Louise Curham and me, and before that there was a larger group but it drifted from there, so Louise and I have a more tight focus on historical research, in some ways such as *Expanded Cinema re-enactments.* But also if interesting people come to town we try to coordinate an event and we set up an event where there is interesting discussion, and that goes for not only the Teaching and Learning Cinema, but also there is an artists' space called Sydney, which Mick is now involved in running. It is hybrid. Jimmy, who was one of the team that did the bubble gum cards, he and Mick and Hannah and Melody, they run this space called Sydney – Jim runs a record store there, they also have film nights there, they have discussions, parties, drinks, sometimes exhibitions. And we organise nights there periodically that we call 'Infotainment' and Mick is really strongly behind those. These nights are a place for people who are visiting from out of town to do a slide show about what they have been up to; it's a nice place to gather. So I have coordinated some of those. I am always trying to coordinate things. I can't help myself, and they are different from the ones that Lisa coordinated.

Yes, they don't sound like discrete events; rather they are an occasional activity, which occur as the opportunity arises and seem to be events rather than projects, not regulated activities.

In the late '90s I coordinated some film nights with Raquel or Mella. We did a series of film nights, which were artists' films and videos. That was as a response to the fact that there was just no-one doing it at the time, there was just no-one showing their stuff. For me that evolved into a much more discrete interest in Super 8 film making and that's where I got involved with Louise with what was called then the Sydney Moving Image Coalition, but it also broke off and my other obsession with general participation in film split off and that's when we started running Squat Fest, which was the anti-Tropfest.

Just as a comment – it is interesting this vying against something that pre-exists, that seems to, in some way, have determined a number of your activities. It is a reaction against these established models, such as Tropfest, that you just mentioned, so there you have the template and your premise seems to often be to flip it over and do the opposite.

Yeah, and it is often working within the format that's given, like a detournement, or Situationist, like culture jamming, where you do literally take that template which is recognisable as such but you twist it in such a way that it becomes something else. Often it does start as a reaction against, it provides a very tangible diving board to plunge into something which then often becomes its own thing entirely and no longer defines itself constantly about anti-this, anti-that. It then starts to find its own shape, but it is often the starting point.

Currently, whom do you see as your peer group and where do you locate your practice, both locally and internationally?

I have lots of different peer groups, I think. On the one hand, there is a whole international network of artists working with social relations, which are my peer group and some of them are actively involved in writing about what they do. And so even more so they are my peer group, I suppose, because we have the ability to contact and connect with each other. When I travel I try to meet some of them. People operating on the boundaries between art and activism are my peer group and there are many of them in Australia and internationally, often within the same generation, whereas I do respect and look up to stuff done in their fifties or sixties who were active in the 1970s, they are clearly not my peer group, they are people who are touchstones or influences. And there are younger people who are in my peer group too, people like Spat and Lugo – they are maybe ten years younger than me but they are like I was at their age, really involved in trying to make exciting self-reflective work, but also create new systems for the distribution of it and the way in which it is contextualised. That's a bit of a vague answer, and then of all the peer groups that I literally belong to, like Squat Space and NUCA and Cinema Group and the Printing Press group. In Sydney there is this whole movement of do-it-yourself pop culture, people who are involved with the Marrickville Jelly Wrestling Federation, for instance, who create all their own characters and produce these mock but real wrestling events which have this very high but DIY production values, so stuff like that which doesn't necessarily call itself art but involves the creative input of lots and lots of different people. These are people who develop their own characters and fight in the style of their characters.

Is it like the old 'World Championship Wrestling' that used to be on telly on a Sunday afternoon?

Like that, but much more playful, a parody in a way, but at the same time incredibly playful and wondrous.

It's a broad question, but what does art allow you to do?

I think it allows me to pursue crazy questions that otherwise wouldn't have a rational place. Like, what would happen if I ate Cornflakes five nights in a row? What would happen if I didn't leave my suburb for two months? And often these things are personal questions that come out of my own experience and the only way to answer them is to do something. The thing about art is that, luckily for us now, the definition of art is broad enough that any of these things can be pursued and accepted as art without too much controversy. So it's a way for me to find stuff out and to participate in the world. To do 'social experiments' sounds all scientific, which it totally isn't, but to try out different ways of doing things to what you would normally do, say, in the workplace or in the university system or something like that, because you can create your own sets of rules about the way things are done. And yet, it's not just about dropping out and becoming hippy up in the hills, it's about a kind of structured formalised method for doing stuff which leaves behind a trace of itself which has aesthetic qualities that are satisfying in and of themselves. It is not just 'drop out of the world and anything goes' kind of thing; it applies its own formal structures, which allow it to be satisfying for me. That's how I see what art enables me to do.

It's hard to answer that question without making global statements or entering nebulous territory. For me it is existing outside categories or acting outside of the pre-existing disciplines. In a way, without being an expert or subscribing to a sociologist's methodology as an artist you can ask similar questions, but you can be a creative dilettante now.

What is the role of writing in your practice and what publication projects have you been engaged in?

Moving from conceptual installations, where I used text on the gallery wall as a set of instructions, I was really obsessed with instructions in the mid '90s and the frameworks for behaviour and experience that they enabled: through scripts and scores – that kind of writing

and text as slogans in a project I did with T-shirts that were emblazoned with national stereotypes, through to text as narrative, storytelling use of text in my blog projects and also, of course, text as a method of rational analysis in other blogs which are not necessarily regarded as art themselves but are reflective upon what's going on in the art world or how my projects contextualise themselves. That's the broad gamut of how I have used text. And publications – blogs are a kind of publication and in the late '90s I made a lot of books and 'zines of a kind of poetry I suppose. I haven't mentioned that part of it.

Based on concrete poetry?

I did a residency in Singapore and produced these green books and writings that were kind of poetic or whimsical. Tim Hilton and I were working on this stuff in 1997 and 1998 when we left university and we became all whimsical all of a sudden. We called them 'poemthingys', because we didn't know what they were but we were both doing them and we mailed them to each other. They were like word play, found phrases that were fascinating and wonderful and beautiful. It was not concrete poetry, I have a book on concrete poetry and I admire it but it was not really the tradition I was working in. I didn't really know how to place it but it began to place in projects in say the Singaporean project where the accumulation of whimsical fragments over time built up a sort of picture of my experience of that place at that time, that for example has evolved into my much more longwinded versions of that which I do in my artist in residence projects now, such as the Petersham one or the Kellerberrin one.

You are incredibly loquacious and produce a huge amount of commentary as text as well as lengthy text-works in your blogs. I can't picture you staring at a blank computer screen for long – it looks to me as if you are brainstorming straight onto the computer, although I am sure you do a pretty good spell and grammar check before sending it out there. To write as prolifically as you do, you wouldn't have too many internal censors operating. How conscious is that?

In fact, yes, that is something that I have thought about quite a lot. In 1996 I had this crazy philosophy that all ideas are equivalent and any idea you have is fine and I tried to practice this kind of anti-censorship: whatever idea I had I had to write it down – no matter how daggy it was – and carry it out, lots of stupid things.

How many hours did you have in the day?

At that time, even Chris Fortescue used to say to me “Don’t you just sometimes go down to the beach and have a day off?” At that time I was mad. I am much more easy going than I was then. I used to obsessively videotape conversations that I would have with people. I even designed this kind of video brace – a video camera mounted on my chest.

Sounds like the Year Long Performances.

Yeah, although at the time I didn’t know about Te Ching Tze. In fact, his history only emerged in the last few years. Definitely there was this obsession with shutting down the internal censor with projects like the ‘Sham, because there is this daily process: each day write something – that’s the rule, it has to be something, it doesn’t matter what it is. To a certain extent, for me the act of writing is like a performance. So in an ideal world I would get out of bed, sit down, write for an hour, an hour and a half, and then it would be done and just trust that whatever happened it would be OK. I found that the morning was a good time to do that because my internal censors were at a low ebb at that point. Of course there are false starts and crossings outs and so on, but a beginning might come. Often it was just say what happened, don’t try to make it into an amazing piece of literature, just say what happened. So that, in a way, takes the pressure off trying to say something wondrous, but in the process of actually writing up the story, some amazing path would present itself that I could never have imagined. In this sense it did become a kind of improvisational performance based on memories of what happened the previous day, so that was my basic plot structure.

I would like to comment on your style of communicating in your blogs – you seem very conscious of being colloquial in your expression and quite inventive in that. Some of it sounds folksy, in a kind of dated Dad & Dave *or Yankee American homily way, such as the way Garrison Keilor speaks when presenting* Prairie Home Companion *on radio; other times you seem more contemporary in your inflection.*

Is that an observation?

Yes, that’s my observation about Bilateral Petersham *at least.*

That’s interesting and I would like to hear more about that because although the subject matter of those blogs was subject to feedback, the stuff that was happening and the content of the stories, I haven’t has a huge amount of feedback from people about the styles and the

voices, how my voice comes across, because one of the things involved is the creation of a character.

I think in that way, compared to speaking to you now, your tone on the blogs was more folksy and that's where you are inventive in your use of the rhetoric.

Certainly not wanting to use complicated art language, which might be too wordy and hard to penetrate. Partly those things are a factor in imagining the kinds of audiences that I want to have, or who I want to be able to participate. So again, using my grandmother as an imaginary audience. These projects were amazing in that they allowed my family to be a part of my art process in a way that they had never been before, because the language was clear and simple and it could reflect upon itself, they could write comments in response and be part of it. The text was the thing. Also partly the style that I adopted was a result of the technology that I was using, so with blogs you read them off the screen. In my own experience in reading things off the screen, if it gets bogged down in complexity – I just think, "Forget about it" or "This is interesting enough, I will print it out." But that was pointless for the blog, which is kind of in a broadcast tradition like fireside chats, so folksy is a good way of thinking about it, and it is definitely a persona I created, but I would like to reflect on that more.

Could you speak about the role of collaboration in your practice?

My first collaborations were with Mick Hender in the early '90s and they were conscious attempts to move myself out of the simple understanding of authorship and to create problems for my own accepted ways of doing things and allow a kind of creative dialogue to happen in the co-authoring of something. It wasn't easy but it was very fruitful and the kinds of works that we produced were quite different, I found that my own works were more like self-contained crystalline objects and the works that we made together were messy rambling, where the edges were fuzzy and so on, and I really liked both. In terms of collaborating with groups like Squat Space, partly it's just like the possibility of several people working on one thing have a lot more person hours and energy where they can really make something big happen that you couldn't do on your own, you know? There's a satisfaction in that. But also there is frustration because of the whole tension of what we were talking about off tape before, you know: personalities, creative control, especially about consensus. How do you

find a common ground or a consensus to move on from versus the autonomy of the individual? There's a certain power in being able to do that, so it's a sort of balance between the two. I think my most successful collaborations have been quite small scale, in terms of less than six people. Any larger than that I tend to get frustrated and things become bureaucratic and meeting-oriented, rather than doing-oriented, because with a smaller group of people you can say "Let's just try it!" and you do it, whereas with a bigger group of people it tends to be this thing where you have to agree. I like, with collaboration, the tension between – say if it's between two people, the two autonomous minds and wills, so *I* do something, *you* do something, occasionally *we* do something but we bounce off each other in that way.

Your work seems to exist in a kind of social space fundamentally. Is there much that you do solo without a social intersection? Bilateral Petersham *seemed to be more solitary, but not really because it was about you in this space in your house here in Petersham but the focus was your neighbourhood and your excursions into it.*

Yeah, it is this pushing and pulling against one and the other, so there is this process of exposure, of going out and there's this process of retreating back in. Out there I am buffeted around by anything that happens, and in here I am the master and controller of everything that happens. So I really like that tension between the two. I never really understood what I meant when I started to use the word "bilateral" in my practice, but it is something – I have come to ascribe that meaning to it. I don't know how arcane or old-fashioned or how much this hasn't caught up with Deleuze's rhizome, but I still keep coming back to this "bilateral" contract or relationship between two entities, me and you, or me and you all, you singular and us – there is always this dual grouping, which comes back to this conversationalism which is important in my work. But that bilateral thing seems to extend in so many ways: in here as the autonomous writer, out there as the person who is being influenced and interactive and doing stuff out in the world, in here communicating virtually back and forth through comments and the blogs.

I guess I should mention, in terms of influences, there is an artist called Stephen Willats who I really got into in the early 2000s because he wrote this book called *Art and Social Function* and he did a lot of diagrams and thinking about this sort of relationship between artists and

collaborators in communities and audiences and understanding those kinds of things. Although I feel like I've moved away from that now because I feel that Stephen's method is partly a kind of autism or something, almost his way of responding to the difficulty he has of existing in the social world.

Is it his way of broaching the world, by formalising these relationships as an artist with the group, that without the protection of his guise as an artist/sociologist he might feel unable to interact with them?

Yeah, exactly, that was my impression in London when I met him four or five years ago. We had a cup of tea together and I realised the awkwardness of his social interaction. I think sometimes with artists who work in social ways you just assume they are these gregarious outgoing people, but – if you asked him, 'What does art allow you to do?" he might say, "Art gives me a structure or framework so I can actually go out into the world and do things." Whereas for me it's not the case, it's something different. I have talked about how I have these problems, not bad problems, trying to solve them, they worry me, my brain worries away at them and art gives me a formalised way of thinking about them, but the very basic function of socialisation is not something that I am doing art for, I don't think. In fact sometimes I find it exhausting because I am constantly in a social world and sometimes I think my private world suffers as a result, it becomes a bit overloaded or exhausted by that. My artworks are often about being available, being a public figure.

What about the role of locality – it seems to be a factor in certain projects?

Even going back to the peg in the ground with the glass case, it was early, but I didn't realise what that was about, but it was this fascination with the very earth upon which the artwork is placed and that has been a constant, whether that earth happens to be, not earth at all but a gallery – where is that gallery, what is the context in which it is being shown and all that sort of stuff. When I started doing all these artists' residency projects, Singapore – how can I make an artwork that doesn't reference the place where I am showing it or making it? It seems to me to be just ludicrous. So I self-consciously build that into the process and the way that the work is shown. With the squats this was a really big factor because real estate became a really big issue and with that artists' group we have been concerned with those sorts of issues ever since. As an artistic precedent you could look at someone like Hans

Haake who not only looks at site specificity in the interior of the art gallery but also in the whole social structures that allow it to even exist: who is sponsoring it, who is the owner of the building and all this kind of stuff, they became really big factors. Then with *Bilateral Kellerberrin*, again with these things, I don't necessarily set out self-consciously to do it but, I made a structure for myself which was: I am here in Kellerberrin for two months, I am going to write a blog each a day about what happens, something as simple as that, and let's see what happens. Naturally the thing that happens is that the place itself starts to infuse the work. It is impossible for it to not be there – that comes through not only in the subject matter, the people you meet and they talk about farming or sustainability issues or even real estate issues come into small country towns because of the emptying out of shops and homes and things as the globalised farming, etc, has an impact on the local.

With Bilateral Kellerberrin *and* Bilateral Petersham*, did you set out to create a portrait of the place, which ends up being a portrait of you anyway, or was it more that you were going to write each day? Did you have an image of how it might look at the end?*

No, not really. After the Kellerberrin project I was much more conscious of what I had done and then my next step was to apply my methodology to my local suburb. But the Kellerberrin one was a big – it wasn't even an experiment because I had no concept of why I was doing it, except that I think it was personal again: let's see if I can come up with an art making methodology which is day-to-day, such that when I reach the end of the period of time the project is just done, and the next day comes and it is finished. I really thought about things like, when you are preparing for an exhibition you become unavailable to the world around you which you burrow away, making something in order to present it in the future, so that was the methodology. In some sense it would not have mattered whether I was in Kellerberrin or New York.

Was this method devised out of a kind of emotional expedient?

What do you mean?

I have made works that some people might look at my method and say I am lazy – it looks like I am doing very little toward the work, but I like to think I am being efficient with my energies. I am very conscious of how stress works with artists, watching artists take on ambitious installations and seeing the hives, flu and sometimes meltdowns on opening night,

etc, that result from an over-expenditure of energy. With myself I have been in situations where in making a work for a show, I have lost all my grace points with partners and friends through being too demanding of their assistance or else unavailable to them. So I am wondering if you shared those concerns and this might be a reason why you have devised these projects that you can 'live in' and other people can live with you in the process of making the work?

Yes, absolutely. I was conscious at the time of saying something like, "I want to come up with a system for working such that, instead of having this enormous fireworks on the last day and the two weeks before that are total stress and then you get to catharsis and then the next day you get sick and you have to start paying back all the bills and the favours," it was like, "Let's come up with something that is a bit sustainable." Just to finish off that, we were talking about locality and so my response regarding the Kellerberrin residency was that I began with a personal whimsical desire to solve a problem that I had, which was how to have a sustainable art practice, I happened to carry it out in a real place, so it was a conceptual problem and I carried it out in a real place, which was Kellerberrin; therefore the whole project was infused with that. There was no way that it could have been carried out in any other way because of that place, if I had carried it out somewhere else it would have brought up a whole lot of other issues. I really enjoy the way those local issues really infuse into my ongoing experience. It is not just a case of using the space as a way of solving my personal problems.

So your first impetus is to not create grief for yourself by adopting a practical method that you work on as you go. That is the impetus, but it is not the content of the work – it's how you go about making the work. But it is not read in the text – the subject for the work is incidental to your reason for creating this solution to personal ways of working.

Yeah, and to jump ahead to another question: you ask about your relationship to the avant-garde, these are rule-based structures form the 1960s. Sol LeWitt, in his thirty-five *Sentences on Conceptual Art* you set up a rule and you rigorously carry it out, you don't change halfway through to a different method. I mean, this is a sort of pseudo scientific way of working. But, with his stuff, I always thought he was this very dry conceptualist, but when I actually saw the results of some of his rules in the DIA centre in New York, they are

gorgeous! The aesthetics and the results are reliant on all these uncontrollable things like light qualities and pigment qualities and the size of the space and all that kind of stuff. So content completely begins to fill his work which until that point had been a crystallised conception. It is similar in my process: you set up a rule, write every day, see what happens, that is the parameter, and the thing that happens is actually… (pause) Both those things are really important because you could not have one thing without the other: the structure or the machine that you establish is a way of getting to that point and a way of forcing yourself to keep going when you feel self-doubt, because it is the same mind that is creating the rule as the mind which is then following the rule.

I like the writers in the OULIPO group such as Italo Calvino and Georges Perec, who create these strictures to work within, but what they do is they curb an excessive expressionism and they allow something to be meted out due to the structure and the limits self-imposed on the work, then the residual effect of the thing the writer wants to say is more lasting I think than a direct expressive statement, it has an attenuated poetic.

There is something intellectually satisfying about those works, because as a reader you know the conditions under which they were made and it's a simplification of the conditions. Especially because now there are so many possibilities and so many things that you can doing in the world, it is completely necessary to find some way of delimiting your options so that you can actually do something – *do anything* - you know? In many ways it's equivalent: you do it this way, you do it that way, it doesn't really matter as long as you do it.

But that's what poetic form is about, such as the haiku or iambic pentameter: we need to find our own syllabic limitations or rhyming forms to allow work to happen.

It is all part of that great conditioning of various kinds of aesthetics.

Have you spoken about your current relationship to the ARI or artist-led sector?

Vaguely. I mean I participate in a lot of it as a collaborator: I admire a lot of what other people are doing, what you guys at the Ocular Lab do and the CLUBSproject people do and even more simple models, like the way that First Draft operates and the longevity of that. I participate in activities in ARIs occasionally in exhibitions and as a participant or audience member, sometimes as an advocate – I am sometimes called upon to speak or write about

artists' practice or DIY or artist-led stuff. I have my own particular take on that: to summarise that take, that artist's initiated activity is an end in itself and it should not be used as a stepping stone to a more 'legitimate' way of operating in the art world through museums and commercial galleries. My favourite artist-run initiatives are of that nature. Lots of artist-run galleries are part of that stepping stone culture: you are emerging, you exhibit in an artist-run gallery and then you step up into the big leagues. As a result, it's like sport: when you are an amateur, you have to pay to play and when you are a professional you get paid to play and I have always hated that distinction. That is partly why I avoid ARIs that involve the payment of rent. I did a project in 2003 called *Dear Artist-Run Galleries,* which was a series of T-shirts, which had on the front, "I don't mind helping out with some costs, but I am fucked if I am paying your rent," and I think there were about seven shirts. I would have made more but I was in a rush and I only had seven shirts at the time. If you wanted to have a shirt it was free, but you had to sign this contract with me and the contract said, "From here on in, forever more you refuse to pay to exhibit your work in an artist-run initiative more than the weekly equivalent for the rent of your accommodation." Something like that, there was a particular formula that I developed, I can't remember what it was, and that you would enter into a dialogue with me (the artist) to develop more sustainable models of artist practice.

So it was the notion of paying rent at all to have a show?

Yep, the unsustainability of that model. I am very disparaging of the kind of stuff that was happening in Sydney in the late '90s and early 2000s: galleries like Rubyare and Gallery Wren, they were very fancy in some senses. Like aspiring commercial galleries, but you had to pay a lot to exhibit there.

So they were more like rental spaces rather than artist-run initiatives?

They were rental spaces but they had their own marketing machine behind them and in some ways you couldn't intervene in that, you had to exhibit under their rubric the way that a commercial gallery was. Whereas, say, at 151 Regent Street Gallery, you designed your own flyers, each one looked different, they weren't engaged in this whole branding thing. Although I am very disparaging about them, I must be careful, because the people who were running those spaces were busting their butts. Nobody was making a profit; everybody is working on a voluntary basis. I made some objections at the time and sometimes the people who were

running those galleries, who called themselves 'directors', which is a term I would never encourage, they really got sensitive and insulted by this idea because I said, "I appreciate your invitation to exhibit, but I refuse to pay rent." They thought I was implying that they were making money out of it.

So they were inviting you to show and then expecting you to pay rent for the show?

Yeah, there was one instance which was a 'zine exhibition and you had to pay $70 to be part of it, which helped to cover the rent. I sent them an email refusing to participate, because I felt that if we pooled our $70 that we were paying for the show – imagine the publication we could produce! It was just going to the landlord, which just seemed dumb to me. Of course I was critical of what they were doing because it was a dumb, unsustainable model, but I was never implying that they themselves were profiteering out of it or that they were gaining anything personal out of it. Of course they were, they were gaining some sort of social capital out of it which in the future they would be able to cash in. It is the case that a lot of the artists who were involved in running those spaces gained a certain sort of prestige as a result, but that is too complex an argument. But they were sensitive because they were working their arses off to run these spaces. I guess the point that I was trying to make and the point that Simon Barney was trying to make was: you are trying too hard, guys, all of our money is going to the landlords, it's ridiculous.

We pay $30 a week at Ocular Lab and we have an ARI grant to cover it, so it's all good.

Do you want to talk about Nicholas Bourriaud and Relational Aesthetics?

I will try and be quick. Most of what I will say now is in that essay that I wrote in the *International Journal of Art and Society.* It was about my Kellerberrin project and pushed off from *Relational Aesthetics* and the work of Tiravenija's. To summarise that, it's amazing that this text by Bourriaud exists: it is very schematic and to a certain extent not very well edited or translated, but it defined an area of activity that is really amazing and fruitful and it is great that he put it out there and is active in that field. There is this whole discussion subsequent to that by writers like Grant Kester and Claire Bishop, critical of Bourriaud for various reasons, and I agree with some of the things that they say about the restrictive nature of a lot of the relational work which is gallery-based, and the general call for panic about what sort of aesthetic criteria you might be able to apply to work that consists of social relations and stuff.

And all these things are problems that are currently in process but will probably settle down in the next few years – it is probably because it is a newly defined field. I think I come to it at the end of that essay and my thought now is that increasingly that fairly traditional aesthetic criteria will begin to be applied; in other words, there is nothing really brand new or inconceivable about what is going on. In my case, for example, aesthetic criteria around narrative and literature, or around performance art: most of those criteria are fairly applicable to Relational work. It is a useful text and it's rapidly being superceded by texts which have been inspired and annoyed by it, things like 'Kester's *Conversation Pieces* or Miwon Kwon's, *One Place After the Other.* As the field begins to proliferate, *Relational Aesthetics* is like a touchstone but actually when it comes to it, it is almost like it is the originator of something.

Yes, it seems to me that the book notes a moment in time and practice, and doesn't do much more than to try and define a new phenomenon, and put it down on the record. I could say that some of your own work prior to the publication of Relational Aeshetics *could have been in that book, but each city had its examples. I think what the book does is give a name to something that was burgeoning but still pretty undefined.*

I think it is a fairly useful name as well; it pretty much is what it says. I doesn't necessarily imply, definitionally at least, a particular method or practice or intention or anything. It is like the way painting doesn't imply much, it could be anything.

Yes, when I first heard the term used, before I bought the book, I thought I could write a book about this because it names what I have been doing. I think a number of people hooked onto that and said, "That's a useful term."

How useful is the idea of 'composite practice' to you? I guess I am attempting to ascertain if a particular kind of self-determining practice may have come about by artists who have been involved in setting up artist-led projects and spaces, due to the number of roles you take on to administer those projects and how this might sit alongside an individual practice.

Barbara Bolt was one of my teachers in the undergraduate years in the UWA, and she was constantly urging us to write. She had this really firm belief that artists were able to conceptualise and theorise in a way that non-artists would never be able to do because of their understanding of practice, especially with something as complex as painting. They were coming from the point of view of knowing what it was like to paint rather than an historian

who might simply know what it's like to look at a painting. Although the outsider's perspective is often amazingly useful; Calvino brings that up in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, he talks about the 'ideal reader' a lot: the 'ideal reader' is actually not involved in the publishing industry, or writing at all. There's a certain pleasure in this encounter between reader and writer in that case, but that's beside the point. Barbara was urging us to not wait around for somebody else to come around and explain what we were doing. That had a big impact on me, also preserving someone like Robert Morris with what he did in the '60s with performance and minimalism and conceptualism and *Art Forum* – and he sometimes wrote under pseudonyms, just this multiple personality that he had going. I was also interested in the way he was criticised for that: people saw him as a rip-off artist, that with anything that was going on he would jump on the bandwagon, "Oh performance art has come along and Robert Morris has jumped onto that bandwagon, and oh, now he's a minimalist, just like everyone else." But no matter what, he was in it, and he had a kind of composite practice in that way. I was really interested in that, because I was suspicious of identification of artists with style. I think at university a lot of artists were stuck in this rut of trying to find themselves a style to operate in and that became their trademark. In fact, in retrospect, composite practice is a kind of style and a trademark in itself, so you just get there in the end but through a different path. I never used the term composite. I don't even really know what that means – composite, like a composition? Maybe you can explain that.

Composite means a thing made up of several parts or elements. What I was thinking in regard to composite practice for artists was the different roles that have normally been split off from a perception of 'art practice or doing art work', such as administering space, curating or coordinating projects, solitary or individual practice. And the space in between these things also: interacting with the people you are working with, the time spent writing about, documenting work, travelling to and corresponding with other artists you are working with, seeing them in the place they make their work or over coffee, all those relationships that come out of setting up a space or setting up a project with other people for other artists or people to be involved. I am suggesting that a different kind of practice that is all embracing of all those things, a number of them can be functioning all at the same time, or some are being practiced while others are dormant (you may not be working on an individual work whilst concentrating on a piece of writing or curating/coordinating a group project, etc). But the

naming of a 'composite practice' includes by nature all these nominations, and does not split off from the notion of 'practice' categories of 'administration', 'writing', 'curating', 'solo work' – they are fall within the concept of an artist's oeuvre, their work. Practice becomes like a 'vocation' in the sense of the time spent; practice is the time lived because you are engaging, generally less or more, in activities of and around art.

I agree with that. I see lots of fields of activity doing that sort of thing. Architects write in architecture journal – there doesn't seem to be this division between the architect who builds buildings and the architecture writer who writes about them. There are often architects who write about architecture. To some extent I wish there was more of that in the art world. Art magazines should be full of articles by artists rather than by these critic people or curators who are involved in something else. It is also this belief that grew out of things like what Barb would say, which is that artists are in a unique position to do a really good job of it, to set up situations and collaborative processes. Who would be better to do it than an artist? Growing up artistically in Perth was a place where you really had to get off your arse and do it because no-one was going to do it for you, so we grew up fairly quickly there, we just organised our own projects and that was that, to the level of professionalism that we might have expected of other. We would learn the skills, make our own posters, make our own flyers, organise food and drinks, whatever was needed for an event, and not be prima donnas waiting around to be selected by some connoisseur, which was what I saw happening a lot in Italy when I was there in 2000. There was this really moribund sector of young artists waiting to be curated into something and when they did, it was into really unsatisfying exhibitions which just looked like photos set up to be taken by an art magazine: who is the audience here, the art magazine people? It was a weird circle of behaviour that never really seemed to have a point of satisfaction to it, except for those who had some sort of prestige to be gained from it.

I am also thinking, as a benign concept, 'composite practice' is all embracing and allows us to function on any level without feeling split between being creative or administrative or whatever. But also in a way the broader practice that has come about from the accumulation of artist-run spaces and galleries since the early '90s and that kind of professionalism came a kind of over-abundance of professionals, coming out of a proliferation of art administration

courses with no jobs to go to. So this composite or broad-based practice is accompanied by an over-professionalisation of the art world in general: needing your MA to be a gallery assistant, no autodidacts here.

The composite practice – my take on that is again, fairly whimsical. I guess my attitude is that as long as I am doing something interesting I am happy. So it could be that I am working on re-enacting some piece of experimental cinema from the '70s, it could be that I am organising a film night or working on a print on a printing press. Also, I am addicted to variety, I like to work on something and then try something else rather than working on the same thing, so that's part of what you might call 'composite'.

For me with my PhD it was a way of not limiting what I do: to allow anything I happen to be doing, which I see as art, to be factored in for the PhD as studio practice, because I see it all coming out of the one place, as you do.

Sometimes I don't realise that until later, I am doing something and I think, I have no idea how this is related to the other things that I do, then maybe three years later I see the connection. It is just part of the same thing about not censoring yourself, not shutting off avenues of activity because you think they are irrelevant or you think they don't connect to anything else. Trust that in some way that they will connect and they eventually do. Because I am no student of psychoanalysis, but there must be some kind of integrity about the individual that results in that connection, or at least in us reading that connection to it.

Meaning is often found retrospectively in work anyway.

What interests do you have outside of the visual arts that inform your practice?

The John Cage tradition in music as a way of creating a framework for attention. You spoke about the folksy voice that I might adopt in my blog. I guess folk art in general is something that I am interested in: people's creative practices that don't call themselves art, like gardening or chicken farming or growing wheat, even amateur processes that are 'bad' art. I was interested when my Dad took up panting classes in night school that he saw in a mall – it is a completely different world really, so are craft practices and stuff.

I was just re-reading an interview with you on the web and this links in with your reading of Dewey, where he talks of the reintroduction of cultural practices into daily life from where it originated.

Dewey is really good on that, and Shusterman who was a student of Dewey – not literally a student, but Dewey was a big influence on his aesthetic theory, and Shusterman wrote a whole chapter in a book called *Pragmatist Aesthetics,* a whole chapter on hip-hop, where he attempts to demonstrate that if we are to take seriously that all these cultural activities including pop, popular arts, are part of a continuum of activity rather than there's really good stuff and there is corrupt stuff, like divine and profane. If we are going to break down that distinction, then we need to start to do it. So he writes this chapter on hip-hop, really breaking down the particular artists and their tracks, showing that the same kind of aesthetic criteria can be applied to them as we do when we are analysing a painting or whatever, and it has been great for me. All through the twentieth century there has been an obsession with the same idea: let's throw a framework around everyday life, or popular folk activity, and call it 'art': like a net, and you haul it in put it on a pedestal and it's high art. I became really interested in these ideas that this guy Crispin Sartwell wrote about in this book called *The Aesthetics of the Ordinary in World Spiritual Traditions.* Sartwell is quite critical of the avant-garde tradition of essentially craving the connection with everyday life when really it comes out of a deep anxiety about it, this kind of modernist deep anxiety about the ordinary. The whole avant-garde modernist tradition is about rupture and even hauling everyday stuff into the avant-garde is a rupture within the tradition of art.

Yes, it fetishises it.

Yes, also this desire to overturn the definition of art constantly, Sartwell has this great chapter about blues where he says: things don't have to be like that, you can innovate within a tradition without needing to kill the father or the previous generation or overturn, this constant overturning, revolutionising. So, to the question, what interests outside of visual arts? There is something to be learnt from these other arts because music doesn't have this constant desire to disrupt the past. Bourriaud writes about that, that the current generation of artists are more interested in using avant-garde practice from the past as a kind of toolkit: there are methods in a toolbox of aesthetic forms.